



## **"No matter how far you run":<sup>[1]</sup> Looking for Alibrandi and coming of age in Italo-Australian cinema and girlhood**

[Lesley Speed](#)

*Looking for Alibrandi* (Australia, 2000) is significant not only because it is the financially most successful Australian teen film<sup>[2]</sup> and a winner of five AFI awards.<sup>[3]</sup> This film has also played an important role in increasing the cinematic profile of Italo-Australians. It has attracted audiences that exceed the hitherto limited markets for most Italo-Australian films and expanded the source novel's predominantly teenage readership. *Looking for Alibrandi* can be linked to Italo-Australian cinema's shift away from social realism and towards market-driven entertainment. The film presents a utopian and revisionist view of Australian society, challenging monolithic characterisations of Australian society in terms of a patriarchal, Anglo-Celtic, middle-class mainstream. The dissolution of this monolithic mythology is implicit in Josie Alibrandi's dawning recognition that Australian society involves complex intersections of class, generation, gender, ethnicity and locality. The film thus alludes to a coming of age that is both social and subjective, encompassing the increased cinematic profile of Italo-Australians in general and Italo-Australian femininity in particular. Josie's social and subjective coming-of-age culminates in the question of reconciliation with Anglo-Australian masculinity.

### **Italo-Australian films and the marketplace**

*Looking for Alibrandi* is the most profitable, and arguably the most prominent, Italo-Australian film. In this article, the term "Italo-Australian film" denotes films made with the participation of at least one Italo-Australian in a major production role, such as direction or screenwriting. Although Gaetano Rando has shown that Italo-Australians were involved in the Australian film industry since the silent era, in the late 1990s films about Italo-Australians continued to be seen as "a largely hidden multicultural aspect of Australian ... culture".<sup>[4]</sup> Such films have been seen as marginal to Australian screen culture and as belonging to what Rando terms an "'alternative' stream", presenting "an 'inside' view of the Italian Australian community ... from the periphery of mainstream Australian society."<sup>[5]</sup> As noted by such critics as Adrian Martin, this marginality has been exacerbated by the dominant culture's tendency to "shove" Italian and Greek cultures into the culturally homogenising category of "ethnic representation".<sup>[6]</sup> Yet, despite this critical push for a more inclusive Australian cinema, *Looking for Alibrandi* remains an exception to the historically peripheral significance of Italo-Australian films.

This article does not provide a survey of films about Italo-Australians; it focuses on films about young Australians of Italian background. As the small number of Italo-Australian films impedes presenting them as a continuous thread of Australian film history, my argument will be reinforced by historical parallels that have already been established between *Looking for Alibrandi* and *The wog boy* (Australia, 2000), although the latter centres on a Greek Australian. My positioning of these two films in counterpoint is intended not to equate them but to illustrate the industrial context and social values with which *Looking for Alibrandi* engages. This article deviates from Rando's centre-periphery view of Australian cinema by addressing the growing marketplace identity of Italo-Australian films.

*Looking for Alibrandi* can be linked to earlier attempts to establish a marketplace identity for Italo-Australian films. In this respect, the film's most significant precursors are Michael Pattinson's *Moving out* (Australia, 1982) and *Street hero* (Australia, 1984), which together resemble a truncated cycle of Italo-Australian youth films. These two 1980s films are linked in several ways, most notably by the production team of director Michael Pattinson, writer Jan Sardi and star Vince Colosimo. Like *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Moving out* and *Street hero* centre on Italo-Australian teenagers. All three films were also marketed strongly to teenage audiences, as I recall from having been a teenage consumer of radio and television during the 1980s. In light of *Looking for Alibrandi*'s success, *Moving out* and *Street hero* can be viewed as earlier attempts to address what Mark Freeman describes as "the absence of a clear voice" for Australian youth audiences, for whom these films provide "recognition and representation of their interests and ... concerns."<sup>[7]</sup> An analysis of *Moving out* and *Street hero* highlights these films' departure from the social realist paradigm of earlier Italo-Australian films.

*Moving out* is one of few Italo-Australian films to be identified with the social realist tradition<sup>[8]</sup> that flourished in 1970s Australia under the influence of the Australian Film Commission's Creative Development Branch.<sup>[9]</sup> The "dramatised documentary" style that Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka associate with social realism<sup>[10]</sup> is exemplified by *Moving out*'s depiction of the inner-city neighbourhood that the protagonist, Gino, must leave when his parents plan to move to the suburbs. For instance, Gino's sense of his limited options is reflected in

the cramped space of his family's home and the constraints it places on his privacy. His lack of a direction of his own is suggested by his friends' use of an abandoned car as an improvised meeting place, signifying the life Gino is reluctant to leave behind. *Moving out* thus reflects the convergence of Australian social realism with subject matter linked to multiculturalism.

The link between the social realist style and Italo-Australian films of the early multicultural period is central to understanding the significance of subsequent films about Australians of Italian background. The social realist style's capacity to serve as a constraint is evident in Dermody and Jacka's outline of Australian social realism, which excludes *Moving out* from the subcategory of the "youth culture film" and places it under the heading of "migrant" subject matter.<sup>[11]</sup> In this way, social realism may privilege one form of social difference over others. *Street hero*, by contrast, defies any simple equation of ethnic minorities with social realism. The film's amalgam of various genres seems overtly to eschew the social realist film's lack of a marketplace identity<sup>[12]</sup> and limited capacity to depict fantasy. Made in a period when new tax incentives for investment in the Australian film industry led to a proliferation of market-driven Australian films, *Street hero* juxtaposes a heady array of film genres and styles. The film includes elements of the gangster genre, the boxing movie and teen romance; it juxtaposes black-and-white flashback sequences, music video-style montages and domestic scenes that recall the social realism of *Moving out*. The stylistic abundance of *Street hero* suggests an exploration of alternatives to social realism, both stylistically and in attempting to target the mainstream youth market.

*Looking for Alibrandi's* teenage audience is prefigured by *Street hero's* engagement with international trends in youth cinema. *Street hero's* juxtaposing of visually stylised sequences with episodes of domestic conflict has affinities with such contemporary Hollywood films as *Saturday night fever* (USA, 1977), *Fame* (USA, 1980) and *Flashdance* (USA, 1983). Like these films, *Street hero* centres on a disadvantaged youth for whom music offers a sense of identity and escape from a troubled family life. Although the difficulty of reconciling this film with existing perceptions of Australian cinema seems to have fuelled negative critical responses,<sup>[13]</sup> *Street hero's* level of ambition - stylistically, thematically and, by implication, economically - is symptomatic of Italo-Australian cinema's pursuit of a marketplace identity.

Central to this shift is the marketing of *Street hero* and *Looking for Alibrandi* as entertainment for mainstream, predominantly youth, audiences. The box office success of *Looking for Alibrandi* is a key example of the promotion of some recent Australian films as pre-sold properties, which draw on the success of such source material as novels, memoirs, stage shows and musical recordings. Mark Freeman argues that these films reflect Australian cinema's capacity to profit through adapting Hollywood's approaches to its own stories:<sup>[14]</sup>

*Both [Looking for] Alibrandi and Chopper [Australia, 2000] are essentially pre-sold properties stemming from already successful books, a dominant focus for production in the US system. The wog boy similarly rides on the success of the Wogs out of work stage shows ....*<sup>[15]</sup>

*Looking for Alibrandi's* successful targeting of youth audiences is closely associated with its adaptation of Melina Marchetta's award-winning teenage novel.<sup>[16]</sup> Thus, a full understanding of the film's marketplace identity involves examining its relationship to cultural developments associated with what Rando calls the "multicultural boom".<sup>[17]</sup>

I have argued that *Looking for Alibrandi's* popularity and high profile reflect Italo-Australian film's shift away from social realism. Along with *Moving out* and *Street hero*, *Looking for Alibrandi* reveals the emergence of Italo-Australian youth films that are overtly market-driven. The social and thematic referents of *Looking for Alibrandi* can be elaborated in relation to multiculturalism.

## Multiculturalism, utopia and upward mobility

*Looking for Alibrandi's* depiction of Josie Alibrandi's upward social mobility is paralleled by the increased status of Italo-Australians in the Australian film industry. This film was made possible by social changes wrought by government multicultural policies that have fostered and facilitated greater recognition of Italian contributions to Australian media culture.<sup>[18]</sup> For instance, the 1980s and 1990s saw the increased visibility of such cultural producers as Melina Marchetta, Jan Sardi and Santo Cilauro, whose work has benefited from multiculturalism and influenced recent Australian cinema. The movement of Italo-Australians into mainstream culture industries can be linked to a utopian current of contemporary Australian screen culture.

The diversification of screen images of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds evokes a utopian view of Australia as a land of opportunity. The model of utopianism to which I refer here is that of philosopher Ernst Bloch, who identifies utopian thought with the principle of hope, manifested in the theme of "possibility".<sup>[19]</sup> Although utopianism has been linked to impractical and fanciful modes of idealism,<sup>[20]</sup> Bloch disputes this perception by asserting that utopianism is based fundamentally on appraising the existing world. The value of utopian thought lies in a capacity to assess the components of existing reality and thus to visualise the possible: as Bloch says, "the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present".<sup>[21]</sup> This interaction between existing reality and possibility is evident in *Looking for Alibrandi's* portrayal of Josie's upwardly mobile aspirations.

The film's portrayal of the Australian class system reflects an aversion to inherited wealth and an idealisation of Josie's relatively disadvantaged status. For instance, Josie's nemesis, Carly Bishop, is school captain and a rich

girl whose affluence and occupation of part-time model signify her seemingly automatic social ascendancy. The film's characterisation of Carly as a stereotype of spiteful privilege is exemplified by a sequence that occurs in church after a funeral. Here, Carly attacks Josie by issuing a gratuitous criticism of "wogs" and dubbing her a "bastard". The film further invests the upper class with vulgar élitism through the subsequent revelation that Carly's father, talkback radio host Ron Bishop, has been in "hot water" over his "views on immigration". *Looking for Alibrandi* thus encourages sympathy for the Italo-Australian protagonist's position outside the Australian establishment.

Yet the film also idealises Josie's own upwardly mobile ambitions. This is evident when Josie's barrister father, Michael, is positioned as a hero for defusing Ron Bishop's threat to sue Josie for striking Carly. Josie's already established aspiration to become a lawyer is reinforced by the film's idealisation of Michael's paternal authority in relation to the law. Her upward mobility is thus depicted sympathetically through being contrasted with an aggressive and vulgar upper class. Michael's status as a paternal underdog is also thrown into relief by the film's negative portrayal of the politician father of John Barton, whose suicide is depicted as a response to parental career pressure. In this way, the Italo-Australian father is positioned as both an outsider and an implicit solution to the inadequacies of the Australian ethnic mainstream. *Looking for Alibrandi's* utopian privileging of Italo-Australian ascendancy can be highlighted with reference to the reclaiming of the word "wog".

In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the significance of the word "wog" forms part of a widespread, revisionist assessment of Australian ethnic identities. Formerly a label of racial vilification, this term has since been reclaimed by Australians of European descent to refer to and celebrate their ethnic identities. This is evident in the opening scene of *Looking for Alibrandi*, for instance, when Josie announces that she uses the phrase "national wog day" to denote "tomato day", her family's annual ritual of making tomato sauce. In this context, the word "wog" is imbued with a combination of defiance and self-mocking humour. Yet, although the term is heard several times in the film, it exists in tension with the utopian depiction of upward social mobility. The tension in *Looking for Alibrandi* between self-mockery and utopianism can be thrown into relief through comparing this film to *The wog boy*.

An eschewal of vulgarity is evident in *Looking for Alibrandi's* refusal to exploit the word "wog", as *The wog boy* does. *The wog boy's* celebration of this term is exemplified by a sequence in which the protagonist is interviewed as a self-proclaimed "wog boy" on a television current affairs program. The program's host, Derryn Hinch, responds by proclaiming that "I'm a wog boy too and ... what this country needs are a few more wog boys". In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the term "wog" is associated largely with secondary characters whose negative and vulgar behaviour Josie chooses not to emulate. For instance, Josie's friend Sera's reference to "national bloody wog day" is linked to her promiscuous sexuality and defiant outspokenness. Similarly, the term "wog" is wielded by Carly in attempts to provoke Josie and her friends. By contrast, Josie utters the term only when frustrated or angry. *Looking for Alibrandi's* critique of inequality and affirmation of Josie's upward mobility thus extends to ambivalence towards the reclaiming of the word "wog".

To summarise further, *Looking for Alibrandi* was shaped by the emergence of cultural producers who benefited from multiculturalism and who have gained prominence in Australian culture industries. The film's satirical view of the class system and idealisation of Josie's upward mobility reflect a utopian current of Australian social attitudes after multiculturalism. The significance of social mobility in the film and in relation to perceptions of Italo-Australian identity can be elaborated with reference to *Looking for Alibrandi's* depiction of girlhood.

## Italo-Australian girlhood and coming of age

The film and novel of *Looking for Alibrandi* mark a public coming-of-age for Italo-Australian female identity. Marchetta's novel is part of the literary tradition of the coming-of-age story, which typically centres on a young person whose acquisition of experience entails a loss that facilitates her acquisition of a new maturity. Like many coming-of-age stories, the novel *Looking for Alibrandi* employs first-person narration, a device commonly transferred to the coming-of-age film as first-person voiceover narration.<sup>[22]</sup> Josie's narration in the novel and film of *Looking for Alibrandi* serves to assert her identity on multiple levels. It makes public the thoughts and emotions of Josie Alibrandi as a woman, as an Italo-Australian and as an Australian born to an unwed mother: identities that in earlier decades were likely to be kept private.

The feminist significance of Marchetta's novel can be understood in relation to a recent history of women-centred confessional fiction. Rosalind Coward notes that the decades since feminism's second wave have involved a proliferation of novels that present confessional accounts of women's experiences.<sup>[23]</sup> These novels may be "seen by the writers ... as relating to feminism" but this relationship is tenuous.<sup>[24]</sup> Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* is a multicultural, teenage variant of the female confessional novel. For instance, *Looking for Alibrandi* shares with the female confessional novel an emphasis on formative childhood experience, the chronicling of a family history and the presentation of "anecdotes as if passed from generation to generation".<sup>[25]</sup> Although Marchetta's novel frames adolescence rather than a succession of life stages, its narration exemplifies the confessional novel's simulation of youthful spontaneity and naivety.<sup>[26]</sup> This confessional tone is also evident in the film's use of voiceover narration to convey Josie's innermost preoccupations.

A precession of subjectivity is highlighted in the film's blurring of the boundary between subjective and objective realities. For example, one scene presents a comically exaggerated view of Josie's surveillance by local Italian

women, to whom she refers in voiceover as "Nonna's spy ring". Here, a local street becomes a *mise-en-scène* of paranoia through the scene's revelation that every black-clothed Italian woman is armed with a hidden camera or a mobile phone. Even the day's newspapers bear such headlines as "Migrant geriatric spy coup" and "Black widow spy ring closes in". In this way, *Looking for Alibrandi* transforms the "social landscape"[\[27\]](#) of an inner suburban street into a psychological landscape that privileges Josie's subjective perceptions. The scene is thus a paranoid variation on Elizabeth Cowie's definition of fantasy as "the *mise-en-scène* of desire, ... a staging ... of desire."[\[28\]](#) Derived from the novel's style of narration, the film's emphasis on Josie's subjective perceptions serves to assert the theme of coming of age.

In this respect, *Looking for Alibrandi* can be compared with the films of Monica Pellizzari. Although Woods' film generally has greater affinities with Hollywood teen films, such as *Clueless* (USA, 1995),[\[29\]](#) than with the European art films that influenced Pellizzari,[\[30\]](#) the latter's work is a local precursor to the fantasy sequences in *Looking for Alibrandi*. In particular, Pellizzari's films make fantasmatic links between actual events and imagination or superstition. In Pellizzari's *Just desserts* (Australia, 1993), for instance, first-person narration and split screen are used to create metaphoric associations between food preparation and a young woman's evolving sexuality, thus reflecting on cultural taboos and the protagonist's fantasy life. Another Pellizzari film, *Rabbit on the Moon*, highlights a girl's belief that her pet rabbit will live on in space after being consumed by her family for dinner. Whereas Pellizzari's films persistently blur the distinction between imaginary and real events, however, *Looking for Alibrandi*'s use of fantasy sequences occurs primarily in the first half of the film. This limited use of fantasy can be linked to the dawning recognition of social identity that underpins Josie Alibrandi's coming of age.[\[31\]](#)

*Looking for Alibrandi*'s depiction of Josie's coming of age engages with a conflicting set of myths about Italo-Australian femininity. For instance, feminist scholar Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli has identified difficulties faced by second-generation Italo-Australian women with incompatible and stereotypical perceptions of the "good Italian girl".[\[32\]](#) On the one hand, parents of second-generation Italo-Australian girls viewed domestic skills, chastity and obedience as requirements for a girl's good reputation, which is closely associated with family honour.[\[33\]](#) On the other hand, the larger Australian society subjected girls who fulfilled this role to "derision and discrimination" because Anglo-Australian culture "views this 'goodness' and 'honour' as stipulating passivity, sexual frigidity, and insularity of character and ambition."[\[34\]](#) As a result, second-generation Italo-Australian women have tended to be accorded "inferior status and less encouragement" in fulfilling their potential.[\[35\]](#) Not only have Italo-Australian girls been subject to constraining gender roles, but popular perceptions of cultural difference have also been perceived as simplistic.

*Looking for Alibrandi* challenges a perception that Italo-Australian identity involves simply a conflict between two cultures. Anna Maria Dell'oso views the "bi-polar" notion of Italo-Australian identity as being no less problematic than screen industries' tendency to relegate Italo-Australian characters to stereotypical roles.[\[36\]](#) Even in more "sophisticated" films and television programs, she notes,

*the almost exclusive focus on cultural 'bi-polar' life - the 'living between two cultures' dilemma - has homogenised the extraordinarily complex cultures and peoples, classes, professions and regions interacting with each other ... in Australian life.*[\[37\]](#)

In this context, Dell'oso argues, *Looking for Alibrandi* and *The wog boy* "break rules" by employing "a subversive, intelligent humour that goes where worthiness and political correctness doesn't have the imagination to go - to those inflammatory topics of sex, youth, class, politics, race, hypocrisy, morality."[\[38\]](#) While some dispute that *The wog boy* contributes much that is positive to the depiction of Greek- or Italo- Australians,[\[39\]](#) *Looking for Alibrandi* presents Josie's existence as being multi-layered rather than bi-polar.

As a third-generation Italo-Australian, Josie Alibrandi is removed from the experiences of second-generation Italo-Australian girls and faces complications unknown to her foremothers. She is also remote from distinctions made by immigrants from different regions of Italy. The daughter of an unwed mother, Christina, Josie is seventeen when she meets her father and lacks the patriarchal upbringing associated with the good Italo-Australian girl. Equally, Josie encounters no familial or cultural obstacle to her pursuit of academic success. The film highlights her ambition in a fantasy sequence in which Josie becomes Shadow Attorney General and the wife of the Australian Prime Minister. Yet her sense that her illegitimacy renders her an outsider is manifest when she says, "I'm surrounded by girls whose fathers treat them like princesses. They think they have everything. And you know what? They do." In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the challenges Josie encounters revolve around middle-class aspirations as much as they involve the values of her Sicilian ancestors.

The film debunks the stereotype of the good Italian girl by depicting Josie's physical independence. In particular, the use of Sydney locations tends to highlight Josie's relative spatial and social freedom. Although Josie believes that her mother and grandmother restrict her freedom, the film contradicts this visually in scenes in which she travels independently around Sydney. For instance, several sequences take place on public transport as Josie travels to and from school. That the characters use such locations to discuss matters they wish to conceal from their parents does not equate to a lack of freedom, but reflects their resourcefulness. In fact, many of the film's scenes take place in public places. The film's more than forty locations[\[40\]](#) range from the Opera House, where Josie participates in an interschool speech day, to George Street, where Jacob gives her a lift home at night. The latter sequence exemplifies the film's ironic treatment of the stereotype of the good Italian girl.



This scene comically juxtaposes Josie's enactment of the role of the good Italian girl with suggestions that she has little interest in maintaining her family's honour. Her appeal to popular preconceptions about Italian girls is evident, for instance, when she informs Jacob that her dress is a potential family heirloom, made of fabric from her glory box, and demands that he avert his gaze from her underwear. Her concerns are humorously reinforced by the presence of a female passer-by who resembles one of Nonna's spies. Yet the fact that Josie actually cares little for the possibility of being seen is highlighted by her conspicuous gesture of hitching up her evening gown before mounting the bike. Equally, her screams of pleasure during the ride are hardly surreptitious behaviour. While alluding to the stereotype of the sheltered Italo-Australian girl, the film's depiction of Josie's public behaviour foregrounds her assertiveness and mobility.

Josie's relationship to this stereotype is echoed in the film's modification of the coming-of-age film's propensity for self-important reflection.<sup>[41]</sup> Although *Looking for Alibrandi* addresses such serious themes as cultural respect and suicide, the voiceover tends to privilege Josie's spontaneous and defiant behaviour as the means she uses to take charge of her life. This opposition can be understood in relation to Adrian Martin's account of the "two great poles" of the teen film genre:

*If you wish to love the teen movie, ... [y]ou will have to accept that even the raunchiest ... teen movie will ... end with sentimental redemption, a social conscience, and a moral platform. And you will also have to accept that ... the most respectable, literary, ... uplifting teen drama [will] have a ... scene where a grossly fat boy barfs all over his parents and teachers. ... This mad oscillation between craziness and innocence is the way of the teen movie.*<sup>[42]</sup>

The opening scene of *Looking for Alibrandi* aligns this paradox with Josie's quest to escape the moral weight of the myth of the good Italian girl.

Josie's intervention in the opening scene's ritual of tomato day establishes the film's privileging of impulsiveness over nostalgic reflection. Initially, her family's engagement in this ritual is seen through a sepia tint that is superimposed on the colour cinematography. The result is a quasi-nostalgic portrayal of a present-day activity that implicitly replicates an old tradition. However, this tint disappears with Josie's first on-screen appearance, which introduces a seemingly unadulterated colour scheme that remains for the rest of the film. The first lines of Josie's voiceover highlight this transition, positioning her presence as the reason the film has discarded its nostalgia: "You might think this is all quirky and cute, but I actually find this really embarrassing." The scene thus positions Josie's presence as the catalyst for a tonal shift that implies sympathy for her restlessness. It is fitting, therefore, that Josie's narration puts an end to the scene. Departing for the beach, she vows "to be the first Alibrandi woman to have a say in how her life turns out". *Looking for Alibrandi's* modification of the coming-of-age story's reflective tone reflects Josie's ambivalent relationship to family tradition.

I have argued that *Looking for Alibrandi* conveys Italo-Australian female identity's coming of age. The film's use of confessional first-person voiceover narration serves to assert Josie Alibrandi's identity as female, Italo-Australian and socially disadvantaged. As well as engaging with preconceptions about Italo-Australian femininity, *Looking for Alibrandi* culminates in Josie's confrontation with ambivalent relationships to her family and the Anglo-Australian male other, in relation to whom the film's utopianism is ultimately challenged.

## Looking for the ethnic other

Josie Alibrandi's coming of age is linked repeatedly to confrontations with the Anglo-Australian male other. In contrast to the mythic good Italian girl, Josie has considerable contact with male peers of various ethnic backgrounds. The extent to which Josie's social existence already exceeds the Italian community is highlighted early in the film by her friendship with one Anglo-Australian youth, John, and subsequently by her relationship with another, Jacob. Despite her cosmopolitan social life, however, Josie continues to believe herself an outsider because of her illegitimacy. Her eventual recognition that she has an inextricable relationship to the Australian mainstream occurs with her grandmother Katia's revelation that she conceived Christina in an extra-marital affair with an Anglo-Australian man. The social and subjective dimensions of Josie's coming of age converge in relationships with Anglo-Australian men.

*Looking for Alibrandi's* reversal of the relationship between the ethnic majority and the Italo-Australian minority is highlighted in Josie and Katia's relationships with non-Italian men. As Lillian Rönqvist notes in relation to Marchetta's novel, "the 'other' in *Looking for Alibrandi* is not ... a member of an ethnic minority, since the ... protagonist is Josephine herself. Rather, the other is the ... Anglo-Australian majority."<sup>[43]</sup> *Looking for Alibrandi* is one of several films that depict Australian society from outsiders' perspectives. In terms of depicting interaction between Italians and Anglo-Australians, Tom O'Regan identifies Michael Powell's *They're a weird mob* (UK/Australia, 1966) as a "classic" film; other examples include *Moving out* and *Gino* (Australia, 1994).<sup>[44]</sup> Whereas *They're a Weird Mob* and *Gino* employ comedy and *Moving out* presents a limited perspective of the larger society, Anglo-Australian men carry considerable dramatic weight in *Looking for Alibrandi*. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue that the film's dramatic "foregrounding of questions of personal history and shame resonates" with a shift in Australia culture after the 1992 *Mabo* decision to "rethink 'race relations' and the colonial past".<sup>[45]</sup> An association between personal history and shame is central to relationships with the Anglo-Australian male other in *Looking for Alibrandi*.

The film relocates to the family the social tension between assimilation and multiculturalism, with Katia's

revelation that her concern for family honour has concealed her own infidelity. This tension is also implied earlier in the film, in the disjunction between Katia's adherence to Sicilian tradition and Josie's apparent disinterest in boys of Italian descent. In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the family's reflection of social tensions exemplifies melodrama's "interiorisation or personalisation of what are primarily ideological conflicts", in the words of Thomas Elsaesser.<sup>[46]</sup> Hence the film's charting of a conflict between appearances and reality across the idealisation of fidelity and the fact that Katia's efforts to be a good wife were unappreciated by her husband. Such a conflict is symptomatic of melodrama's role as what Laura Mulvey calls "a safety-valve for ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family".<sup>[47]</sup> *Looking for Alibrandi* draws on the film tradition of melodrama to address the personal impact of migration's aftermath.

The conflict between cultural retention and assimilation remains unresolved at the film's end. Although Katia's revelation confirms that the process of assimilation is underway, the final scene's images of the family reuniting for another tomato day belie this, not least because Katia's secret appears intact outside her immediate family. In the face of this social irresolution, the film posits a narrative resolution in which, as Elsaesser writes of family melodrama, the characters "emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world".<sup>[48]</sup> In particular, Josie's final dance with Katia to an old Italian song, "Tintarella di Luna", is an act of acquiescence in relation to which Katia's authority is lessened by the latter's professed hypocrisy. Yet this conservative affirmation of the "closed world"<sup>[49]</sup> of tradition is counterbalanced by the possibility of change, as embodied in Josie's continuing friendship with Jacob.

The complex relationship between ethnic self-image and perceptions of the other is highlighted in the film's portrayal of Josie's relationship with her boyfriend, Jacob. For instance, disjunctions between expectation and reality are a source of comedy in their early scenes. When Jacob offers her a lift home from the school dance, Josie is quick to assume that a nearby panel van is his vehicle of choice. To her surprise, he leads her to a motorcycle parked behind the van. The film develops this comic play of expectations into a study of contemporary Anglo-Australian male behaviour. At Josie and Jacob's first meeting, for instance, his extravagantly casual demeanour contrasts with her polished, assertive manner. He deliberately provokes her by leaning familiarly close and confiding, "Hey, I liked your speech by the way. I was rootin' away for years before I started using a condom and it scares me shitless the risks I took." Yet Jacob's subsequent public speech reveals that this profane exterior masks a liberal moral sensibility.

*Looking for Alibrandi*'s subtle romanticisation of Anglo-Australian masculinity recalls romance fiction's positioning of the hero. The film's departure from a monolithic view of Anglo-Australian masculinity echoes Tania Modleski's observation that many romance novels "are concerned with girls 'outgrowing' their resentment of the male, with their learning to ... form ... an erotic attachment to him."<sup>[50]</sup> A romanticisation of Jacob is evident in the film's disclosure of his sense of humour, his popularity among his peers and his willingness to discuss his feelings about his late mother. The film's revelation of the kindness and sensitivity that underlie his unkemptness is echoed in Katia's eventual praise for her Anglo-Australian lover, and may be read as part of an attempt to cater to Anglo-Australian viewers as well as to ethnic minorities.<sup>[51]</sup> Jacob's speech day presentation reveals that his casual style of expression is not simply a symptom of laziness but is linked to his belief in freedom of speech and action. While Josie disdains his clothing, Jacob explains to his teenage audience that he became politicised after witnessing the televised abuse of a protestor who was wearing a Nick Cave T-shirt. In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the initially comic misapprehension between Josie and Jacob is succeeded by a poignant confrontation between self and other.

The film's othering of the mainstream can be understood in relation to Lacan's concept of "the good". In her analysis of the white Australian fantasy in literature, Jennifer Rutherford uses the term "the Australian Good" to denote a moral code that has national and individual dimensions.<sup>[52]</sup> This moral code is linked to "a national fantasy" that political groups such as One Nation have sought to recover, a code characterised by the virtues of "neighbourliness and a fair go" (7). When put into action, however, this code is often manifested as aggression. Rutherford links this paradox to Lacan's concept of the good as a signifier for an original that cannot be recovered. In particular, she emphasises Lacan's view that

*The domain of the good is the birth of power ... To exercise control over one's goods, as everyone knows, entails a certain disorder that reveals its true nature ... i.e. to exercise control over one's goods is to have the right to deprive others of them. (26)*

Italo-Australian perceptions of the Australian good punctuate Josie's relationship with her Anglo-Australian boyfriend in *Looking for Alibrandi*.

A climactic argument between Josie and Jacob highlights the inadequacy of a single moral code by exposing a web of other-directed moral assumptions. Although the argument originates with Jacob's inopportune attempt to initiate sex while his father makes them tea, Josie also is implicated in the subsequent conflict. In particular, the tension arising from Josie's rejection of Jacob is exacerbated by her stereotypical analysis of Anglo-Australian existence: "You're so lucky. You live without culture or religion. You just have to abide by the law." Yet her own moral ambiguity surfaces when she bars further discussion of her romantic attachment to the late John Barton, on grounds of respect for the recently deceased. With Josie and Jacob's simplification of each other's moral code, the othering of the Anglo-Australian mainstream gives rise to the expression of prejudiced assumptions on both sides.

This clash of assumptions suggests failed attempts on each side "to exercise control over one's goods", in Rutherford's words (26). This is exemplified by the two characters' contrasting responses to experiences of loss. Whereas Josie views mourning as occurring within circumscribed periods of time, Jacob's loss of his mother prompts him to proclaim that "there's no such thing as periods" of mourning. In *Looking for Alibrandi*, the ethnic diversity of Australian urban life prompts an exchange of stereotypical assumptions that, like the moral code of the good, can never do more than approximate a cultural signified. Yet despite the danger, identified by Rutherford, that misreading the other may "deprive others" of their own "goods" (26), *Looking for Alibrandi*'s othering of the Anglo-Australian implies an embrace of responsibility for shaping Australia's cultural future. With Jacob's arrival in the final scene to participate in the Alibrandis' tomato day, the prospect of collaboration is perhaps the culmination of the film's utopian view of Australian society.

Although the box office success of *Looking for Alibrandi* may be attributed to marketing strategies, the significance of the film's wide popularity is more complex. This film demonstrates that Italo-Australian identity cannot be understood simply as a social issue or in terms of being torn between two cultures. In place of stereotypical ideas about migrant girlhood, the film presents a coming of age of Italo-Australian femininity and of Italo-Australian film as a commodity. Inherent to this progression is a morally challenging perspective of Australian ethnic diversity. *Looking for Alibrandi* expresses vividly the extent to which contemporary Australia has, in two generations, embraced diversity, expanded opportunity and become more competitively materialistic for even the young.

*I thank Ida Venditti and Sophia Spinelli for their tomato day stories.*

## Endnotes

(To return to your place in the text, simply click on the endnote number)

[1] Melina Marchetta, *Looking for Alibrandi* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1993), 175.

[2] Australian Film Commission statistics list *Looking for Alibrandi* as the twenty-third most successful Australian film at the box office in the period from 1966 to 9 August 2004, with a box office return of AU\$8,300,454 in current dollars (i.e. not adjusted for inflation). See "Top Australian films at the Australian box office, 1966 to 31 December 2002", Australian Film Commission, <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp> (22 September 2003).

[3] *Looking for Alibrandi* won AFI (Australian Film Institute) awards in 2000 for Best Achievement in Editing, Best Film, Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role, and Best Screenplay Adapted from Another Source.

[4] Gaetano Rando, "Migrant images in Italian Australian movies and documentaries", *Altretalia*, no. 16 (July-December 1997), [http://www.fga.it/altretalia/16\\_saggi1b.htm](http://www.fga.it/altretalia/16_saggi1b.htm) (27 September 2004).

[5] Rando, unpaginated. The present article adopts Rando's use the term "mainstream" to denote the Australian ethnic mainstream, ie. Australians of Anglo-Celtic ancestry, also referred to as Anglo-Australians.

[6] Adrian Martin, "The Sweep of Australian Cinema", *Australian Book Review*, no. 218 (February/March 2000), <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/FebMarch00/mar.html> (20 September 2004).

Also see Lex Marinos, "Robert de Niro's waiting: Media images of ethnicity", in *Ethnic Minority Youth in Australia: Challenges & Myths*, ed. Carmel Guerra and Rob White (Hobart: National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 1995), 35-6.

[7] Mark Freeman, "The Australian Teen Film", *Critical Eye*, <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~freeman/articles/ozteenfilm.htm> (31 October 2003).

[8] Rolando Caputo, "Street hero", in *Australian Film 1978-1994*, ed. Scott Murray (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1995), 157; Geoff Gardner, "Moving out", in Murray, 134.

[9] Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, vol. 2 (Sydney: Currency, 1988), 40.

[10] Dermody & Jacka, 41.

[11] Dermody & Jacka, 41-2.

[12] Dermody & Jacka, 40.

[13] For instance, Dermody and Jacka view *Street hero* as "the most uncertain example" of the Australian youth culture cycle, highlighting the film's "compromise between its social issue and ... packaging for the youth market." (42) The perception of *Street hero* as anomalous is also implicit in Rolando Caputo's description of the film as "a synthetic teen movie" in which the stylised setting creates an "overstated" contrast with "the ...

impoverished space" of the family's home (157).

[14] Films of which the success may be attributed to well-known source material in other media are neither new nor exclusive to Hollywood. Examples of the use of this production strategy outside the United States include *They're a Weird Mob* (UK/Australia, 1966), *The Tin Drum* (Germany, 1979) and *The Castle of Cagliostro* (Japan, 1979). The phenomenon that Freeman identifies with contemporary Hollywood is, as Justin Wyatt explains, "the ability to *pre-market* a film using ... the cross-overs between music, film, and other media" (*italics added*). See Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1994), 133.

[15] Mark Freeman, "Packaging Australia: Working Dog's *The Dish*", *Senses of Cinema*, no. 12 (February-March 2001), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/dish.html> (31 May 2004).

[16] *Looking for Alibrandi* won the 1993 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award (Older Readers), the Multicultural Book of the Year Award, The Kids Own Australian Literature Award and the Variety Club Young People's category of the 3M Talking Book of the Year Award, as well as being judged the most outstanding book for the previous ten years in the Young People's category of the 2000 Fairlight Talking Book Awards.

[17] Rando, unpaginated.

[18] Examples of difficulties encountered in the past by Italo-Australian filmmakers include Giorgio Mangiamiele's lack of support from the Australian government when his film *Clay* (Australia, 1965) was accepted into the Cannes film festival, and his subsequent unsuccessful applications for film funding. See Bill Mousoulis, "Is Your Film Language Greek? Some thoughts on Greek-Australian film-makers", *Innersense*, <http://www.innersense.com.au/productions/writings/greek.html> (27 September 2004); and Scott Murray, "Giorgio Mangiamiele - Passionate filmmaker: 13 Aug 1926 - 13 May 2001", *Senses of Cinema*, issue 14 (June 2001), [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/mangiamiele\\_obit.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/mangiamiele_obit.html) (28 October 2004). As recently as the 1980s, writer-director Monica Pellizzari met with institutional resistance to having her film *Rabbit on the Moon* (Australia, 1987) subtitled. See Pellizzari, "A Matter of Representation", *Artlink*, 11, nos. 1 and 2 (Autumn/Winter 1991): 80-1.

[19] Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing", in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 12.

[20] This can be attributed to an equation between utopianism and socialism. For instance, Fredric Jameson notes that after World War Two, utopia "was ... a code word and simply meant 'socialism' or any revolutionary attempt to create a radically different society, which the ex-radicals of that time identified almost exclusively with Stalin and with Soviet communism." See Jameson, *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art/MIT Press, 1988), 17. By 1964, however, Bloch and Adorno argued that the utopian element had disappeared from Eastern European socialist societies. See Bloch, 13.

[21] Bloch, 12.

[22] Lesley Speed, "Tuesday's Gone: The Nostalgic Teen Film", *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 29-30.

[23] Rosalind Coward, "The True Story of How I Became My Own Person", in *Female Desire* (London: Paladin, 1985), 175-180.

[24] Coward, 179.

[25] Coward, 180-2. The portrayal of Italo-Australian femininity in *Looking for Alibrandi* may be compared with Monica Pellizzari's perspective in "A Woman, a Wog and a Westie", in *Growing up Italian in Australia: Eleven young Australian women talk about their childhood*, ed. unknown (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 1993), 133-147.

[26] Coward, 180-1.

[27] Meaghan Morris, "Fate and the Family Sedan", *East-West Film Journal* 4, no. 1 (December 1989), 132.

[28] Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia", *m/f* no. 9 (1984), 71.

[29] *Looking for Alibrandi* has in common with *Clueless* a teenage female protagonist, first-person narration that includes ironic commentary on the images, an upbeat depiction of the protagonist's acquisition of self-knowledge, an emphasis on contemporary urban settings and a tendency towards a comically exaggerated view of the social world of the school.

[30] Rose Capp, "Looking Awry: The cinema of Monica Pellizzari", in *Womenvision: Women and the Moving Image in Australia*, ed. Lisa French (Melbourne, Damned, 2003), 242; Pellizzari, "A Matter", 180.



[31] The film's director, Kate Woods, notes that Josie's capacity for daydreaming was intentionally reduced after John Barton's death, which prompts Josie to re-examine her own life. Refer to audio commentary, *Looking For Alibrandi*, DVD, Australian Film Finance Corporation, 1999.

[32] Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, "Beyond the Myth of the 'Good Italian Girl'", *Multicultural Australia Papers* 64 (Fitzroy: EMC Clearing House on Migration Issues, 1989), 1.

[33] Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1-2.

[34] Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2.

[35] Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2.

[36] Anna Maria Dell'oso, "The Shock of the Familiar", in *Looking for Alibrandi: Original Screenplay*, by Melina Marchetta (Sydney: Currency, 2000), xi.

[37] Dell'oso, xi.

[38] Dell'oso, xi.

[39] Freda Freiberg and Joy Damousi, "Engendering the Greek: The Shifting Representations of Greek Identity in Australian Cinema", in French, 220.

[40] Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian cinema after Mabo* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155.

[41] Adrian Martin, "Teen Movies: The Forgetting of Wisdom", in *Phantasms: The dreams and desires at the heart of our popular culture* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1994), 63; Speed, 29.

[42] Martin, "Teen Movies", 67-8.

[43] Lilian Rönqvist, "Familiarizing the Alien: Young Adult Fiction in the EFL-classroom", *International Research Society for Children's Literature*, 15th Biennial Congress (20-24 August 2001), <http://www.childlit.org.za/irsclopapronqvist.html> (22 April 2004).

[44] Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 251-5.

[45] Collins and Davis, 157, 3-4.

[46] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of sound and fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", *Monogram* no. 4 (1972), 3.

[47] Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama", *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 39.

[48] Elsaesser, 9.

[49] Elsaesser, 9.

[50] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 45.

[51] Evidence of the marketing of the film to general audiences includes the fact that old-fashioned, easily recognizable Italian songs were chosen for the tomato day and Easter scenes to appeal to non-Italian audiences. However, the film's attraction of various social groups is underscored by Melina Marchetta's revelation that many Italian women equated Kick Gurry's Jacob with "the Australian guy that we fell in love with". Refer to audio commentary, *Looking For Alibrandi*, DVD.

[52] Jennifer Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 7. Further references to this text appear as page numbers in brackets.